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BASKET FOR A FAIR

BOOKS BY

LAURA BENÉT

Basket for a Fair
Goods and Chattels
Noah's Dove
Fairy Bread

BASKET FOR A FAIR

By
LAURA BENÉT

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FIRST EDITION

To
WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT
With the love and admiration
of years.

"Today we are tall as angels
Bearing crowns from a fair." . . .

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CRYSTAL BALLS

GLASS MASK

Pity me, envious ones,
For that I sit within,
Like a kept gnat survey
My kingdom thin.

Molecules make a mole,
And shifting atoms, space;
Wherefore I hold a glass
Before my face.

A mirror draws the sun,—
Shall not the sun defend
The fragile entrance
From foe and friend?

Delicate guard, keep me,—
A stone one day may fly,
Leaving my ravaged deeps
To mercy of the sky.

STONES FOR A PILLOW

When man has sunk his head,
His story told;
Carved stones he fashionèd
Write his name in gold.

Proclaim they not aloud
Great labor's praise
For which the craftsman bowed
To weary days?

That Norman arch,
Its every stone, a key,
Full beauty's march
Through dim clerestory,

Pillars that staunchly stood
As though by giants hurled,
Fretwork of iron and wood
Rippled and whorled,—

Dream shaping to desire
From a rude axe's blows,
Surviving sack and fire
Like passion's rose?

. . . . .

Creation, take your rest,
Mind, fold your wings,—
Are you not witnessed
By these faithful things?

THE MIRROR AND THE RIVER

"I SHALL buy a mirror,"
Said the young bride
Who grew up on the river.
"A silver mirror,
Crystalline, glancing,
Subject to star's dance,
Clear as a child's soul
Or a glass-blown flower,
Mystery's daughter
Subtle of power." . . .
She was tired of water,
Its ebb and its roll.
She bought the bright mirror,
And forgot her friend, River,—
But the river could bide.
First a coveted jewel,
Then, suddenly cruel,
Glowered the glass,
Betraying, dismaying.

She watched hours pass
Smokily clouded,
Sinister, shrouded.
She feared to look in,
Seeing no light on years to be,
No wingèd liberty,
Small love to win. . . .
After long days
She turned back to the river,
Ancient familiar
By her vined house wall,
Of quiet ways.
In its meek clarity
Found a wide charity
Covering all—
Pebbles of childhood,
Weeds of remembrance,
Ripples of pain.
Knowing it never could change, that calm river,
She sank on its bosom for ever and ever.
Forward again
Went the clear stream with a song and a gleam
Like a lighthearted lover,—
Staunchly abiding,
Flowing and gliding,
The spring freshet over.

INTIMATE

Happy worm, I
Who in myself curl
Snug as in a burl
Or within a nut
Man cannot cut.
Though so tightly devised
By reason of my size
Abounding in each form
That creation's flowering
Can bring to my devouring.
Pass into me
White age, nobility,
Sweet youth, infant simple
Border my wimple.
If infinitesimal
All things living,
All creatures loving
Enter my serving hall.

"ENJOY HIM FOREVER"

(*Westminster Catechism*)

Naïve, olden catechist!
In your secret soul, you knew
That, through your Calvinistic veins,
Ran the essence of spring dew
Bearing the bloom, the pageantry
That rises in a burgeoning tree,
The fiery going, the fierce heat
That lends the chase to lovers' feet.
Not with bent knee upon a board
Calling upon a frowning Lord,
But with the heart's celestial tone
Bred of pure happiness alone.
Through Love as through a crystal glass
You saw fresh meadows gently pass.
Sluggish Eternity took on
The garment of a golden sun

That wrapped you round in holy glee
Tenderly, protectively,
Until your soul's remotest voice,
Babbled: "I ever shall rejoice!"

UNKNOWN FRIEND

How shall I give this paper sight of you?
Too delicately does your image pass
For thought to shatter its frail looking-glass,
Or robust laughter change its sunny hue.
Suffice: above this world's sharp littleness
You tower for my lone delight. Your voice
Is restful as a bird's in summer bush.
The whirligig of mad humanity
Involves me like a circus; yet, within,
Your spirit folds me from unseasonal grief,
Drawing to me things fresh and green of leaf. . . .
If ever I should find the dower thin
And not accruing interest,—at some tea
Will you look up and suddenly see me?

COMPANION HEART

In youth when her heart was a-flood
With quickening life,
She gave of it to the casual comer,
The neighbor mourning his wife,
The complaisant rover.
Children, all things human
Were cherished and calmed and fed;
The heart bled and bled,
Suffering inexhaustibly
From wantons' misery,
Warm blood trickled pale and thin.
Frightened, she drew it in,
Veiling from curious eye,
Sang and whistled humanity by
Till the heart should be recovering
From this trick of insatiable loving.
Months passed, bringing forth young days,
Years marched unfaltering ways.
One night in the dust and gloom

Of a quiet room,
She bared her breast to see
What the thing might be
Lying leaden-heavy, scarce moving
Against her bosom's heaving,
And discovered a thing, alone,
As small and hard as a stone.

THE TREE

Triple-barred, tight-lipped,
Ringed as a serpent's hide,
The tree Terrible
Where our fortunes abide.

In extremity I fingered
Its sour and tasteless fruit.
My desperate fancies lingered
On its implacable root.

Trembled your torrid petals,
O cruel tree—
Like molten metal
Fell they heavily.

I gave my breath,
Gazing upon your height;
Measured my love by Death
In one sharp night.

ITALIAN WOMAN ON MACDOUGAL STREET

Noon is above her, and the city sun
Scorches her dusky head. The subtle rays
Fall on the cluttered pavement, on the trays
Of gathered grapes whose juices spill and run.
In spirit as unshaken as a nun
She wastes no thought upon the devious ways
Reserved by love for those that it betrays,
Nor dreams of colors where her dress is dun.
Yet holds she to the moment as to a flower—
Church bells, new bargains, friendly folk she sees,
The hour, the hour, and nothing but the hour!
Ground in the mill of her monotonies
She calmly sucks earth's every glistening pore
And of her uncertain tenure asks no more.

CHRISTMAS EVE

The piteous, white-nosed ass
Saw Mary line with grass
A rude, ill-shapen stall
Before night cast its pall
Over Bethlehem's place.
A black lamb in disgrace
Made small sounds of distress,
Sighting the Loveliness.
Cheeping and golden birds
With sacrificial words
Fluttered the crib above,
Stirred by a brooding love.
Ants sanded the cold floor,
The crossbill marked the door,
Dun kine knelt with warm flanks
In tender, questioning ranks,
Yearning to give new milk
To that pursed mouth of silk.
Like neighbors worshipping

Syllables they did sing
And from the Infant's look
Strange, starry comfort took.
Sudden, on this white peace,
A red cock's hail rang thrice—
The Baby turned His head
From drowsy reverie;
Shuddered upon His bed
With a wailing cry.

HERBAL FLOWERS

GIRL AND WIND

Wind only, of her few and deepening loves
Bidden to intimacy,
Divines her thought as do the mourning doves,
The heavily golden bee.

Wind, elfin fugitive, invites no vow,
Of the same blood these two go wandering,
Wan orphan souls touched by that murmuring bough
Shading a primal spring.

Wind, ever-changing, changes not. Her feet,
Treading new worlds as casual birds the sky,
Grow heavy. She becomes an alien sweet,—
Elusive, shy.

But with the summer evening she will stray
Beyond a garden's dropping scents, to find
Spaces, forsaken by the rout of day,
Summoning her pale wind.

THE SPRING

In a hidden circle of stones,
Upland pastures cover
With only stray cattle
Turning its grasses over,

Tall, lonely elm trees
Swaying and hovering,
Dolorous sighing
Marks a forgotten spring.

Deserted wells fade from sight
Of women and men,
But where dreams alight
Young feet may come again.

Though pebbles may choke, weed smother
The mirrored deep,
With their moods of weather,
Murmurous seasons creep.

There comes a day when a doe
Touches its brink,
Or a truant boy stoops low
On its lip to drink,

For of this hidden treasure,
These shy ones know the worth,
And, once more, in full measure
Water transforms the earth.

SHEPHERD

A SHEPHERD sings:
"Man was begun,
A blundering thing
In the yellow sun.

"The cry of his soul
Was a young lamb's cry
Piercing the caul
Of a winter sky.

"Man, the beast,
Exalted to be
At the final feast
Of felicity."

MOUNTAIN WOMAN

"Red of a maple's in this dress,
Leaves of September's comeliness,
That burned my heart and stirred my tongue
To sing I was strong-boned and young.
I touched lips in October's cool,
Filling my heart up like a pool,
Setting my soul to span the sky
Pure happy so I craved to die.
Came colder sunsets in the fall,
Reddish-gold turned our mountain's wall,
Color upon the hilltops spilled
Like it was sheep that had been killed
Because of anger, lip-locked, tight,
In a shotgun's stingy spite. . . .
Now the year's poorer with things going
And footsteps that are never coming—
Footsteps to scare the shoats and fowls,
Startling up the hoarse screech owls;
Where I lie in bed to listen

Its moonlight makes the shadows glisten.
While I dye this dress for me
No kettle's smoke curls up a tree.
Snow lies in the valley bed . . .
Red-against-white, white-against-red,
Colors for his new-taken bride,
A-quilting over him beside
With fancy threads run in its weaving,
When my bosom has done heaving! . . ."

HILL SKIPPING

Gambolling sheep, you are intense
In Biblical obedience,
Teaching the hills to skip,
To dancing measures dip,
Under a blazing sky,
So very blithesomely.
Mountains, told to leap like rams
In exuberant expression,
Little hills to prance like lambs
Without secular repression.
Surely this daily posturing,
These coaxing bleats, this song that sings
In sheepish rhythm, in wether's chase
Should hearten hills to mobile grace.
Yet no clod beneath the trees
Is more inflexible than their knees.
Like clowns with blackened faces, neat
On ingenuous awkward feet,
Silly sheep, from time to time

You enact this pantomime
On stage that never has a setting
Without aiding or abetting.
Yet, as toward mutton you meander,
To distant township sadly wander,
Biddable and meek and shy—
That mischievous mountain cocks an eye!

ABSOLVING SNOW

Hold your wrath, skies!
A bruisèd earth requires
From your omnipotent eyes
No hint of fires.

Her penitents, hurled
To death's cold from fierce heat,
Explore their little world
On wavering feet.

Lest they inherit
Passion or renown,
Assoil their spirits
In your heavenly down.

LITTLE VALLEYS

No PRAISE is ever given
To little valleys,
Yet hills are riven
With their leafy alleys,
Offering peace
Like children on their knees.

No cave for dragons to spawn,
No battleground;
A slowly visioned dawn,
Noon's heat and evening sound,
Occasional kine
Drifting to tree and vine.

Lost in your stride, O men,
Such unclaimed places,
Fashioned for you to hide
Your changèd faces.
Straying sheep seek your covers,
Unhappy mountain lovers.

GOLD ON GREEN

For this hour we sit here,—
You and I alone, my dear,
From a hillside contemplate
All Eternity's estate.

He, bland consoler, bringing balm
Within his hollow, shining palm,
Bestows again this glistening green
Revival of a battered scene.

Flings the golden light adorning
Earth as on the first May morning,
Melts the shadows where they hover
On a newly quickening river.

Behold, as then, the image blaze!
In perpetual amaze
Listen to the growth of leaves
Rather than to rustling sheaves.

Emulate Eternity
By ardent worship of today,
Observe the everlasting grace
Reflected in the other's face.

LILACS

The coldness of death,
The full rapture of birth,
Breathe again in your breath,
Simple thing of the earth!

In your healing scent,
Straight-growing, green bush,
Lies that brave element
Of the waterfall's rush.

As bright showers reckon
Starved life of the wild,
Your fragrances beckon
The sorriest child.

The country's mauve youth,
Its age's white spring
Witness for truth
In one brief blossoming!

COLORED SKEINS

LITTLE KEY

"A KEY!" said she, in surprise.
There, dangling from his wrist
Was a delicate thing, the size
Of a fairy's fist.
"May it show me the heart of my child,
Aloof and wild."

She had waited until he slept,
Wan, wistful-eyed.
On slippered feet she had crept
Through darkening rooms to his side.
Yes, over the heart's pulsing clock
Was a tiny lock.

It swung open, the heart of her son!
What saw she? High, wilding grass,
A colt tossing its head to run
Through a rocky pass.

Voices cried: "Mother, come no more
To this secret door."
Voices said: "Have no fear; it is free
From aught save liberty."

Though the mother, closing it fast,
Withdrew, strange fires in her brain,
She tried the key at long last
Again and again
When she thought her son short-spoken
Or brooded on promises broken.

The little key, rusting in air,
Fitted ill the lock,
Each time she forced it there
Gave a shuddering shock.
A fragile instrument bent
By prying intent.

There came a night when the key
Would not fit at all,
When her son in an ecstasy
Turned his face to the wall.
His heart, quickening its pace,
Withdrew to a farther place.

O, the distance stretched between
His vision beauteous
As Vega or Sirius,
And her in the known valley
With its sweet, enclosèd dream
Now transcended wholly.

QUEEN'S RING

When it was sunken, sunken in the moat,
Who can tell from a tightening throat,
Where it dipped, how it dropped as it bubbled,
What lower levels were troubled?

The queen moped in her bower,
Now her ring was gone.
It had blazoned a single hour
The gods smiled on,
Hotter upon her finger
Than a steel spur.

The king missed his familiar ache
Of fierce jealousy.
Another man's token to take—
He loathed to see.
Though his wife's shapely wrist
Was duly lifted and kissed.

But the queen's little only son
Pined for a jewel
Shining for him in bedtime's travail
Like a lovely moon.
Armed with a string and a pin
He dabbled the deep moat in.

When he fished up a skull and bone
In safety upon the grass,
(The jewel clinging to its own
Like an eye of glass),
Courtiers placed the day and the time
When one of them vanished forever,
Remembered an ancient rhyme:
"A ring discovers its lover."

Covered with black dismay,
They bore their prince to his sleep,
And hurried the skull away—
A frog gulped down the ring that day—
To find was to keep.

LIGE WEEDY'S FIDDLE

For years he knew a stream
And all its wild embraces,
As it flowed silently
By mountain places,
Where a child's solitude
Heard cries of bird and wood.

His father taught the way
To lovingly hold the bow,
Draw from taut fiddle strings
The notes of long ago.
When folk came laughing or grieving
To gather on a Saturday evening.

His father's palsied hand
Made him give over playing
For festival or dance
Or a revival's playing,
"Jethro's Dream" or "Reuben's Train,"
His son took up the strain.

But always the sound of water
Alluring, dim,
Its lovely waywardness,
Led, beckoned him.
No mountaineer's fresh daughter
Mysterious as running water.

Folk noticed in his fiddle
A strange rebound
From mountain ditties,
A weird, elusive sound.
Feet pattered not and tongues fell still
When Lige's step came to the sill.

They knew on breathless nights
That he strayed far,
Seeking the forest glens
Where lonely creatures are.
They shunned the silent man
Unlike his lively clan.

Forms were seen, too,—
Shapes delicately white,
Fading with mist
Or dawning mountain light,
Treading such measures brief
As scarcely bent a leaf.

The year of the great drought,
When the stream, trickling, dried,
Lige Weedy, aged and spent,
Pined slowly, slowly died.
Fiddle and bow were laid
In coffin by his head.

Midwives, muttering, said,
On that grave beneath the moon
Invisible fingers played
A witching tune.
And a stream's sob, a fiddle's wail
Merged in a darkly distant vale.

THE CHANGELING

Adapted from a fable in Walter De la Mare's *Come Hither.*

Once upon a time,—
Long ago it was,
When spring sang gently in the grass,
In every bud, in every stone,—
There drove across the river Rye,
An old, old lady, bird alone
In her silvery carriage, on.
Under a greening lime
She heard low sounds of glee,
And, straining her dim eyes,
Saw beneath a tree
A little boy in stuff of light
Chuckling joyously,
The curling hair upon his head
Yellow as a primrose bed,
His two eyes softly blue
As a myrtle flower's.

Shaking his sides, he laughed aloud
As though Time had not hours.
Angrily the old lady spat:
"Boy, what are you laughing at?"
"At sparrows, ma'am," was the reply.
"Mere dirty sparrows," quoth she. "Fie!"
"They were just saying," piped the child,
"Here comes across the river Rye,
A coachman with a blind old horse
Driving a blind old lady."
"Hoity-toity," stormed the dame,
"Impudent changeling!
I am not blind nor have I been."
"Nor these mere sparrows," cried the wean.
There fell a sudden hush—
And where his streaming hair
Had blown, a bright gorse bush
Was gaily blooming there.

MILA AND THE BIRDS

She dreamed that she would see great spaces,
Empty, lovely, terrible places,
Where blue stars fell and planets shone
And mighty spirits travelled alone.
She dreamed that she would mount on wings
That cut the silken air like blades,
That ran like skates before the wind,
Mocking the maudlin earth behind.

Northern lights—
She dreamed them in her sleep.
Shadowy heights—
She woke to see and weep.

And the wings fluttered, the wings quivered
And, at her chamber window, shivered,
Rousing her from unconscious lull
By visions strangely beautiful

One morning in the frosty winter
When ice was edged as a splinter.
Were these true children or true birds
That spoke with reassuring words?
They were not pigeons, doves, or owls,
They bore no likeness to her barn fowls
Though their bodies were lithe, their flesh was clear,
Their feathers those of a chanticleer.
Crystal as glass their shining eyes—
Lake water at a spring sunrise.
Their heads wore the gloss of Sunday sheen.
One was crimson, one was green,
Two were violet, one was white,
And the sixth as yellow as morning light.
With them in at the cottage door
Entered a hope not there before.
Though the little old mother scuffed and scolded
The while she clothes in a cupboard folded,
Screaming the ragman the next day
Should bear the glittering flock away.
But the ragman's mind was consumed with dread.
He merely stared and scratched his head
As the glowing things shook their wings in his face:
"To kill them," said he, "will bring disgrace!"

So safe they roosted, in rafters dry
Through the thatch peered their distant sky.
Money came to the little house
That had scarce supported a starving mouse.

Lovers came, too, where none had been
Courting her as she were a queen.

Conrad, Angelo,
Johannes, Luke.
(Names from a singing
Psaltery book)
Courted and kissed her,
Promised her love.
She, sadly silent
As grass in a grove.

But the birds brought in grain
Yellow, milky, and sweet;
The birds plucked out poppies
To lay at her feet;
The birds sang liltings
To her weary brain;
The birds whispered secrets
That brought down the rain!

Rain fell and kept on falling
As though the thirsty earth were calling.
Beast and peasant noisily
Suffered in mirk and misery,
Suffered until the swelling flood
Must be appeased with human blood,
And boats were wafted in the stream
To seek out Mila's candle gleam.

"The witch, the witch," the people cried,
"She and her cursed flock, woe betide!
She shall be flung to roaring water
For certain she is the devil's daughter!"

Those who ponder
Learn philosophy
From the dour forest
And the raging sky.
Out of a sighing heaven
Events are unfurled,
Mysteries riven
Not of this world.

They moored their shallop at Mila's gate
On an evening dark and late.
As the billows drenched them with spray,
Peered forth in terrified dismay.
Feathers concealed the wattled walls
As though the house wore ancient shawls.
The leaking roof was thatched with down
Soft as fur on a courtier's gown,
And at the window, steeply high,
Seven birds were poised to fly. . . .
One had sadly wistful eyes
Looking on them in stunned surprise
As waves met over the little town
With its evilly minded men. . . .

Then the waters sank—and slowly
The marshes grew green again.
The ragman, clinging in wonder
To the house that rode sturdily,
Saw seven great birds, a-whirling,
Arise out of the sea,
Saw Mila and her bird suitors
Fly away in a brilliant cloud.
And, after years (says the legend),
A race lovely and strong and proud
Came to dwell by the self-same meadows,
To plough by the self-same streams,
And out of knowledge and kindness,
To weave new, delicate dreams.
For delicate dreams breed color
And untutored souls grow wings,
And from the unpeopled spaces
Summon benign, bright things.
So even a humble ragman
May find, in his low estate,
That those shall be small who are mighty,
While the humble ones shall be great.

THE PLAYMATE

For loneliness Susanna wept;
And, secretly in the old house,
Stole up the stairs on careful knee,
Eye to the crack in attic doorway pressed—
One stubbed small hand
Held close against her beating breast—
Waited in wonder and amaze
(Lest elders might arouse),
Until she saw
For a short breathing space
Upon the floor
Within that dusty place
Two worn and tiny shoes
Dance toward her where she lay
Outside the bolted door.
Two shoes of personality
Chubbily bland,
Needing no other cues
Than her delighted gaze

To make them come
And pirouette
In happy play
About the room;
While, as they circled by,
Walls hummed a little tune,
Windowpanes flared to darkening sky,
Mice squealed in wainscotings;
Yet, to Susanna only, stepped,
As though bestowing boon,
The solitary things;
And through the warping wood
A phantom whisper crept
As if a comrade understood. . . .
What time Susanna went
To her lone bed, content,
She sweetly slept.

WHITE HORN

Village folk knew
On days that young leaves blew,
It could be better heard;
In wondering groups they hearkened,
Eagerly loitered,—
To sort its sibilances
From the birds.

For this was a ghost horn
Before Man born,
The spectral offspring
Of the vasty wildwood;
Recalling startled deer,
Hunters and flowing cheer,
Men who took heart and ran
With the day's flood.

The horn was whitely small,
Silvery sculptured all,

A shy bird on the mouthpiece.
It was said,
That, with it, yeomanry
Under a leaden sky
Could baffle the dumb devils
And raise the dead.

So soft it spoke
From thickets of stout oak,
So tenderly did it draw
Its notes together,
That, miles away, ploughmen
Might hear it plain
Through the spring tides of rain,
The freezing weather.

But, sang the fancy's tale,
Though White Horn could not fail
To sing when pleased or given
A spirit's handle,
No mortal eye might see
It visibly
Without the snuffing
Of his own life's candle.

Who sees this gleam
As the white glitter
Of an icy fountain?

Who hears a piercing note
Coming as from a child's throat
On a mountain?

That summons, silver shrill
As moon's on summer night,
Where does the call alight,
On whose brain sound?
What dreamer does it burn
Suddenly like a wound?

That he strides to the wood,
Although a dusky bird
Calls ceaselessly,
And white flakes herd
Like feathers in a cloud,
Weaving a blinding shroud
Above his head?

Bleeding and torn
He plunges through the fern,—
And sees the horn
(Tiny and glistening)
From a low birch tree swing
And cunningly curl,
Throwing light like a pearl
Along the forest's rim.

He snatches his desire
With eager fingers,
And a strange numbness
Tingles in their bone,
Falls to day-dreaming—
Then in sleep he lies
On a dark patch of turf,
Lost and alone.

But sunny people come
Of a low height;
With cries of odd delight,
They take his hands.
Lifting his slender form,
They bear him high—
Where he has lain
The grass speaks and is warm
Under a tongueless sky. . . .

White Horn grows lovelier,
Good souls aver.
Now mortal's mouth and spirit's
Do combine.
At Michaelmas, at Easter,
At eve of Midsummer,
Fey notes pour from the forest
Heady as wine.

GRANNY'S TALE

"When did you see it, Granny?"
"At night, my dear, to be sure,
When moonlight sought every cranny
Of that mullioned house on the moor.
The hedge sprang up, high and white,
Though it never was there before."

"Where did you see the man, Granny?"
"He came with a hunting horn,
Sailed through those briars like a swan
In spite of poisonous thorn.
After him deerhounds ran
And one silvery unicorn."

"What of the hedge, Grandmother?"
"It blossomed out like a bride
In a flower unlike any other
My young eyes ever had spied.
With never flurry nor bother
He plunged through to the other side."

"And the lady was waiting for him?"
"I did not see her then—
But I heard in the silence grim
Clamor of fighting men. . . .
Trembling in every limb
I crouched there, small as a wren

"Or like a wandering hare
Lost and faint on the fell.
Clear and strong on the air
Came tinkle of a sweet bell.
Three times the hedge parted there,
Lifting the ominous spell.

"Out of it came into sight
Master and baying hound.
Beside him a creature bright
Whose feet flowed over the ground,—
Of a seven-year-old child's height
And gold thread her garments bound." . . .

"Did the house vanish? Tell me!"
"No, but its work was done.
Eerily, suddenly, swiftly,
With the first ray of morning sun
That hedge was utterly shorn,
And no wee, trotting unicorn!"

"FOXES HAVE HOLES"

Fleck of stone in the valley lying,
Sanctuary of living and dying,
Are you for ever and ever alone?
No, on evenings when dullards slumber
Flocks a company, faithful in number,
To the white comfort of your zone.
Black sheep, munching forbidden flowers,
Dogs fled wildly through dread morasses,
Wide-eyed, enduringly patient asses,
Weasels, badgers, owlets pour
From under their canopy of blue
Into harboring shadow of a pew.
A helpless and uncompassioned race,
Soliciting pardon and good grace,
Seek the communion of fellowship
Bowing their heads, moving their lips
In a chant never heard on earth or in heaven,
Freely ascending, mournfully given,
Voices of beasts too sorely driven.

Who shares their worship? Not alien man.
When casual breezes carry the strain
Folk say the place is under a ban,—
That infant angels on urns asleep
Arise to ride on the black-nosed sheep.
None save wounded animals rally
To this ancient church in the valley!

WHITE QUEEN

Lunatic monarch, to our dire dismay,
Jam yesterday is your decree;
And Jam tomorrow there may be,
But never Jam today.

Bless your wild genius! I would madly hurry
To meet you on a walk.
Through jungles of your topsy-turvy talk
Adore to hear you scurry.

You cannot clarify one thought, poor dear;
But what is normal thought?
Judgment is set at naught
When nimble nonsense whispers in our ear.

Reign, questioning and clever
Midget in mirth created,
Perpetually belated
And wrestling with your shawl and crown forever!

SOME ANIMALS

BALAAM'S ASS

The drudging ass
Was animated in the pass;
Her forbears had been foaled
Where tides of ancient wisdom rolled;
In the angel's apparition
She sensed a new condition.
(Angels are more equitable
Than human folk about a stable.)
So her kicking, rearing, plunging,
Her stubborn, wayward lunging,
Were but means of self-expression
And assertion that she saw
More than far.
Balaam, early extravert,
Only thought his beating hurt.
The dumb ass—immortal beast—
Preceded Balaam at the feast.

Lord, in Thy new millennium with sweet grass
Reward that sensitive and psychic ass.

THE SHEEP

With much experimentation
Occurred a revelation
In gentle sport to keep the Lord of all
From brooding on Creation's fall;
A wistful, half-angelic creature,
Strange and stubbed in every feature.
Ethereal shapes the new-made lamb did meet
That laughed with merriment to hear him bleat,
And vowed the Almighty had some secret yearning
That in this fleecy oddity was burning,
Or that old Lucifer's jealous madness crept
Into ram's belly as it pranced and leapt,
Into the smug small eye, demure demeanor,
Its very weakness made the vision keener.

Once man was made to propagate and leaven
The ninny sheep became the saint of heaven.

THE GOAT

Impoverished ancient,
Browsing on morsels of your discontent,
That slant of your archaic eye
Betrays the way you went.
You were, most eloquent of prophets,
Unsolicited by the sky;
A monarch never made to bless,
An orator without a voice,
A spirit in the wilderness
With a distasteful cry.

THE MACAW

Those who have clipped your wings will never see
Hairy fruit dropping from the cocoa tree.
But your wild scream may tell in puny rage
The darkening heavens were your only cage.

Those who have snared you here will never know
Coral isles blossoming in rose and snow.
But your bright wings through the dull days will be
Horizons opening on monotony.

Plaything of fools, your masters cannot feel
They are the captives bound upon a wheel,
And you, the symbol of a liberty
For which we reach a little way—and die.

THE DOG

Dog and his tail forever spell
Interrogation. It is well.
Dog and his tail forever show
Man's indefinite search for woe,
Pathways seared with burning pitch,
Last light snuffed out by the ditch.
Tail, the wobbling bit of truce,
Surely has an occult use.
Without that same, the pup would be
Half of a monstrosity.
He's canonized and made far-seeing
By this appendage of his being.

THE CAT

Cat was a circle once,
Round as an O.
In purriness
She slept and sat, just so.

From static state evolved
An elongation.
Sleek adolescence
Brought rich exultation.

Vocal statistics
Marked her forward flight.
Eros evoked
Her solos in the night.

Relentless Time
Reduced her to the mat;
Fierce feline memories
Faded into fat.

THE MOUSE

Mouse whose wet whiskers shyly brush my face,
Seek a foundation, an abiding place.

Mouse, you compel me into resignation
To your peculiarly designed creation.

Traps must be recompensed and lean cats fed,
Stale cheese may waft you to Procrustean bed.

CAMEL RECLINING

In undulant deliberation
Tremendous and calm,
This child of a Sphinx's creation
Lies down like the lamb.

Eternity's roads his feet wander
As winds and the sea.
He accepts with no questioning wonder
What is, is to be.

Though in vision, the opal oases
Alluringly lean,
Enveloping alien faces
In their feathery green.

In dreams a bright water is fleeing,
Elusive forever.
He drinks of its sweetness, perceiving
A nebulous river.

Now with dull eyes closing slowly,
Still cannily bland,
The great form, majestic yet lowly,
Sinks into the sand.

THE ELEPHANT

Out of the slowly moving past
Of jungle forest's teeming breath
Comes an earth bulk, unwieldy, vast,
To fitly challenge death.

Limbs that shall tread the forest floor
In a primeval dance of glee,
While eyes sunk in forgotten lore
Conceive philosophy.

Evolves a giant, suavely kind
To his atomic following.
Yet whose fierce trumpets down the wind
War's summons fling.

Huge ears set for the slightest sound
Pity the leaf before it falls;
Echo ant's rustle on the ground,
The thunder's crashing walls.

THE ZEBRA

For you, prince
Patterned in singularity,
Nature took rule and compass
In her hand.
In faultless symmetry
Your striped robe was planned,
Painted and spread to dry,
And man's myopic eye
Stares, ejaculating,
"Horses—or asses?"
As, sweeping by,
Your graceful little shape
Stirs the tall grasses.

THE CHIMPANZEE

You were a gnarled dwarf
In a thorny place
Digging red gold
For all your greedy race.
Eternally aged child
Of a mystic Fate,
Your punishment equals
Your barbaric state.
Now, clutching furious,
An inscrutable cage,
You vent a gigantic forest's
Silent rage
Upon the fragile wood,
The potent key
That closed so craftily
On your liberty.

THE TURTLE

Meandering spirit,
Seeking, never finding,
Destined to a daily path
Winding and rewinding,
You take your pleasures sadly
And at a temperate pace,
Shouldering in stolidity
The cradle of your race,
Exquisitely mottled, proud
As a pigmy dome.
Worshipping a shrouded past,
A primeval home,—
Ancestor-loving tortoise,
Conservatively
You burden yourself
With memory's rooftree.

THE SEAL

Child of sleek, slippery fins
Begun with such a vim
To be a loving daughter,
What strange perversity
Polished your shins
And left you in the water?
Out of your round, devoted eyes
Huge possibilities arise
For tea and toast.
But wavering extremities,
Formed for fluctuating seas
Or chilly iceberg's rim,
Deny this comfort's ghost.
Staunch, feminine seal, in yet another life,
You, functioning as mother and as wife,
Shall oscillate a placid rocking chair,
And on upholstered porches take the air!

PENGUINS

Squat sages
Patting protruding bellies
As an indication
Of witty sallies;
Black-and-white question marks
Left alone
On an island's
Bleached horizon;
Historical remnants
Gravely wise,
Assuming a
Lilliputian size—
From Destiny's rag bag
You crept alone,
Asked for bread
And received a stone.

THE GIRAFFE

Dappled and straight
As a well-shaped carafe
Is the suave lineament
Of the lord giraffe.
Pride elongates him
Beyond bestial woes
While earthly matters
Linger at his toes.
Dispassionately, rapt,
The aspiring brute
With gestures apt
Plucks stars instead of fruit.
No vocal chords are his, no conversation,
Busy loquacity is not his ration.

THE SQUIRREL

Squirrel leaps,—
Only a frantic chase
After the soundings
That mark endless space.

Squirrel play—
A child's lonely vacation.
What airy secret way
Merits investigation?

Genius to pry
And love of squirrel ease
Makes knotholes multiply
In cherished trees.

But forests quiver—
Nuts are scattered far
Where elfin paupers shiver
Under a frosty star.

THE KANGAROO

Accepting as your lot perpetual motion,
Eccentric notion of a higher power,
O patient kangaroo,
You've fallen heir to
A most extraordinary dower.
Your forelegs small
Are Nature's affectation
And feebly dangle
Without occupation.
Your elongated hind legs
Do the trick—
Vigorous, leap,
More vigorously, kick.
Your pouch is a receptacle—
O touching spectacle!
For helpless ones
Unfitted for home runs,
Ally of the opossum, the jerboa,
You would have floored even old Father Noah!

THE HARE

Innocence and swift escape
Describe your manner, little one.
Grasses hold your furtive shape,
Nature's well-loved son.

Helpless, wedded to the wild,
Christened in the snow,
Moon winked on you, plaintive child,
Gave you roads to go.

Fates fought for deceiving you—
That white cotton ball
Manifest on rear-end view
Is a clue to all.

Is a brand for your pursuit,
Elfin creature, delicate,
Running till your paws are stubs
You scarce miss your fate!

THE LEMMING

Inveterate adventurer,
What distant brine has lured you?
What manner of raging
And outwitted kine,
Absconding, have abjured you?
Marking a mystic goal,
You at the time appointed
Hasten to it,
While our pragmatic soul
Ponders, disjointedly,
"Why did he do it?"
O lemming, to what end
Is this sad saga sung?
You hasten oceanward to disappear
Upon your vow's completion.
While on your course, you breed
Innumerable young
Who lustily feed,
Causing the land's depletion.
Idealism is seared on your plump shape,
Your mind, meticulous, firm, and inchoate.

THE LIZARD

Lizard, unjustly raised to rank of beast,
Of oddities you're not among the least.
You breathe or not, just as the spirit moves you,
You bring forth eggs as natural law behooves you.
No hair upon your scaly form we see—
But humans lack that sleek commodity.

You are not fish since you court earth and sun,
Nor serpent since on agile feet you run,
Nor insect since your kindred grace the Nile—
(A terrible insect were a crocodile).
In color you abound in various hues,
Marble, streaked, spotted, yellow, reds, and blues,
As salamander you touch mystery's height
By dancing fearless in the firelight.

THE CRICKET

Pertinent Puck,
Persistent and undaunted.
Who has not ears to hear
When hope is chanted?

Expectantly
The housewife you address
In accents tinged
With eerie tactfulness.

Satiric spy,—
Tell us, is your sly mirth
Occasioned by
The serious ones of earth?

Men who, high-hatted, pray
Their gold to keep,
The while luck glides away
To chimneys where you sleep.

Who crushes you,
Quelling your elfin laughter,
Draws vengeance due
Now and forever after.

THE GUINEA PIG

Surviving sans a tail,
You raise no wail;
Cognizant of the variety
Of beast creation;
And that, apace,
Your chestnut-colored race
Progresses as a nation.
Why then should caudal deprivation
Cause demonstration?
Pride in fecundity
Consoles you for rotundity.

THE HEDGEHOG

Hedgehog, hail the happy day
That fashioned you against decay.
You were a cog in Nature's plan
Before Man's doubtful race began,
And though, in stature a Tom Thumb,
Not destined early to succumb,
No crass inferiority
Marked your godmother's legacy.
With spines of salvation bounded,
All your foes you may defy,
Into a tight fortress rounded
Take your ease beneath the sky.
Meekly you lap bread and milk,
Countenance as bland as silk.
Yet, by the same mysterious token,
Crush and crack an adder open,
Raising your troop of spiteful bristles
Thick as an avenue of thistles.

THE MOLE

NATURE's provision has omitted eyes,
Versatile snout
Explores an underworld, minute in size,
Winding in and out.

Blind men are beggars: he, a shuffling monk
In catacomb.
Whose labyrinthine tunnels, darkly sunk,
Are lost in loam.

In patient fury he pursues earthworms
To mouldy doom,
Securing thus, for long, untroubled terms,
Peaceful houseroom.

Habits, moreover, destinies assert.
Carving deep furrows,
True to his type, Diogenes in dirt,
Blithely he burrows.

THE CROW

A BRUISED and furtive hue,
Blue black as grieving dusk, is destined ever
To fall on you.
Mope you beneath it, bird of falling weather?

Your presence waylays, haunts,
Blackening man's fields, startles him to prayer.
Prophetic of his want,
Your wings are flapping on the frosty air,

Shadowing steepled trees;
Glowering on the sea whose little ships
Fly on before the breeze
To which an orphan sea gull dives and dips.

You are folded in the night,
Your snarling croak, a challenging fierce cry,
Intruder on the light,
Blotting the vivid beauty of the sky.

THE DORMOUSE

(Out of *Villette.*)

Spying a hole in meadow's wall,
He rolls himself into a ball.
Stoic and resolute, his leap
Precedes a lengthy winter sleep.

He says: "This is my lot, you know,
Accepted since it's written so;
Perhaps spring winds may penetrate
The crypt wherein I lie in state.

"Perhaps," he says, "and if they don't,
Emerge I cannot and I won't;
Just curl my toes up and dream on
Until the frost is finally gone.

"But if dour crows pick from the stones
Of this grey wall, my dormouse bones.
Chant as my epitaph the line:
'Flesh may as well go soon as syne.'"

THE SWAN

THERE is a quiet music in your rhythm,
There is a white contentment in your form,
Exquisite bird that faces dreary winter,
Stately and warm.

You lower your high head for no finite thunder,—
Destruction that shall deafen a human ear
Passes your image in incurious wonder,
Mirrored upon the weir.

Bred of wild things that drank earth's quiet beauty,
Not savage man's abuse of it, you glide
Far from the milling town, the sordid duty,
In a withdrawn pride.

No gun shall mark your end, no vandal children
Discover your limp body by a tree;
You face the lake—and then the silent ether,
Vanishing noiselessly.